DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 837 IR 057 664

AUTHOR Swaine, Cynthia Wright
TITLE Challenges in Delivering Library Services for Distance Learning.
PUB DATE 2000-01-00
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Libraries; Access to Information; *Distance Education; Guidelines; Higher Education; Information Technology; Library Administration; Library Collections; *Library Role; *Library Services
IDENTIFIERS American Library Association; Canadian Library Association; Web Sites

ABSTRACT

The first section of this paper on library services for distance education discusses the status of distance learning in higher education. What distance learning means for libraries is addressed in the second section, including considerations related to diverse locations, agreements with participating institutions, delivery limitations, librarian commitment, and awareness of new ways to deliver services. The third section summarizes requirements for libraries and provides World Wide Web addresses for American Library Association and Canadian Library Association guidelines. The fourth section describes the challenges and impact of distance learning on library service units related to administration, collection management, acquisitions, cataloging, collection access (interlibrary loan, circulation, and reserve), reference and instruction, and technical support systems. (MES)

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Challenges in Delivering Library Services for Distance Learning

By Cynthia Wright Swaine

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C.W.Swaine

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Challenges in Delivering Library Services for Distance Learning

➢ Status of distance learning

Distance learning can be thought of as simply learning that takes place when the instructor and students are separated. In the past it often meant so-called correspondence courses. Today, it usually refers to teaching and learning at a distance, often using audio, video and computer technologies.

Peterson's Web site [http://www.peterson's.com/dlearn/dlalpha.html] lists 885 institutions providing some form of distance education in the United States and Canada, as of January, 2000. Hundreds of colleges and universities are offering "virtual degrees" (degrees conferred on students who have taken all their coursework online). One estimate is that three million students are taking online courses as of the year 2000.

➢ What distance learning means for libraries

Libraries are faced with the challenge of providing services that are equivalent to the services offered on campus. Some of the considerations are outlined here.

- **Distance Learning means Diverse Locations.** Distance learners may be enrolled at various types of sites--hospitals, military installations, ships at sea, businesses, community colleges--or may be taking courses from their own homes.
- **Distance Learning means Dangerous Liaisons.** Librarians must be aware of any formal agreements made with participating institutions. If agreements are vague, expectations may lead to resentment and uncooperative attitudes.

- **Distance Learning means Delivery Limitations.** Traditional interlibrary loan services, commercial document delivery services and courier services may all need to be used to bring needed materials to students. For those students in other countries or those serving on ships at sea, even these methods may not be feasible in all cases. Creative alternatives must be considered.
- **Distance Learning means Determined Librarians.** It is essential that librarians be committed to full service for distance learners. A committee made up of librarians from each service sector can work together in ensuring success.
- **Distance Learning means Diligently Looking** for new ways to deliver services, based on constantly-evolving technologies, new program offerings, increasing enrollments, and student needs.

➢ What libraries must do

Comprehensive guidelines for distance learning library services are available from the American Library Association [http://www.ala.org/acrl/guides/distlrng.html] and the Canadian Library Association [draft at http://gateway2.uvic.ca/dls/guidelines.html]. Additionally, accrediting agencies establish criteria that must be met. In general, libraries must write a mission statement, develop user-focused priorities, provide adequate learning resources and services and evaluate them on a regular basis.

Accrediting agencies require adequate numbers of library staff, sufficient and well-organized collections (including electronic resources), services that include good access to materials and orientation/instruction.

➢ Challenges and impact of distance learning on library service units

Each department in the library faces its own special challenges in meeting the needs of distance learners.

- **Administration**

Administrators have the challenge of setting up an infrastructure that integrates distance learning services within the library. They face the challenge of identifying, tracking and understanding cost factors, re-allocating funds, and using additional funding avenues--internal and external. They must also consider re-allocating staff resources and training staff for new responsibilities. They must find ways of helping library staff understand distance education issues and often must tackle the most difficult issues themselves.

- **Collection management**

Collection management librarians must help bibliographers see the need for selecting with distance learning in mind, not just for on-campus needs. They often must try to find more funds for purchases (especially electronic products) without increasing the materials budget. They need to develop expertise in handling licensing agreements and negotiating electronic purchases that include access from all distant sites.

- **Acquisitions**

Acquisitions librarians must consider the use of core collections and reserve collections at the sites, in addition to electronic collections. They may have to develop new workflow procedures, track more closely for materials ordered in multiples, and deal with an increased load of rush orders. They must also work with staff at the distance learning sites in getting collections set up and returned.

- **Cataloging**

Catalogers are faced with decisions about providing additional bibliographic access to electronic resources. They are faced with the need for adding many more location codes in the catalog, depending on the number of distance learning sites. Also, they must communicate with staff at the distance sites, encouraging them to return materials and report lost items so that they may be withdrawn from the library catalog.

- **Collection Access (interlibrary loan, circulation, reserve)**

Included in the challenges facing these librarians may be dealing with an dramatically increased workload, training staff in new technologies--such as electronic reserves procedures, possibly creating a priority workflow for distance learning interlibrary loan requests, investigating alternative document delivery methods, and understanding and applying copyright law appropriately.

- **Reference and Instruction**

Challenges will likely include working with the reference serials budget to re-allocate print and CD-ROM funding to Web-based resources. If many people staff the reference desk, it may be a challenge to help everyone understand all the aspects of distance learning and of distance learners' needs, as well as to ensure that the staff convey information clearly, especially in regard to online access to resources.

Finding new ways for orienting and instructing distance learners is another challenging area. Librarians must consider developing a variety of new ways to deliver instruction, such as designing interactive Web-based tools, teaching on television, creating videos, and using videoconferencing software. These new methods can require a large investment of time, both in training and development.

- **Systems**

Systems librarians may be challenged with identifying the equipment and the capabilities available at many different sites, then finding a common technological denominator. This becomes even more problematic as courses are delivered to sites which lack technical support and as courses are delivered directly into the homes of students. Creating access to IP-restricted sources and searching for improved solutions for authenticating users without sacrificing security are ongoing challenges.

➢ Summary

As more and more institutions offer distance learning opportunities, the challenges to libraries to meet the needs of those programs will increase. Each department in the library faces its own special challenges, even though some service units will feel a greater impact than others. Following guidelines and meeting accreditation standards are imperative. These challenges often can be handled effectively through the formation of a committee that examines issues and seeks innovative solutions.

Cynthia Wright Swaine, Distance Education Coordinator, Perry Library, Old Dominion University, January 2000